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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet presents the results of a series of focus groups comprised of Native American children and adolescents regarding their perceptions of race and class in the media. The results indicated that although some youth were concerned most about the absence of their group in the media, others were primarily concerned about stereotyped portrayals. Many Native youth spoke first about problems apart form race, such as sex, violence, values, and the portrayal of youth in general. However, common themes relating to the minority experience appeared consistently in all the focus groups. First, on the rare occasions when Native youth saw their culture and race in the media, the portrayal was often an unflattering picture. Many youth stated that they do not necessarily look to the news for role models or reinforcement of their identity. Second, youth suggested more differences in news media treatment based on socioeconomic class rather than race as a definite divider. Third, Native youth often stated a preference for programming that would appeal to everyone, have a diverse racial cast, and reflect the realities of their lives. The report concludes that Native youth are concerned about media portrayals of race and class, note the absence of groups other than whites and African Americans, and believe that media can influence opinions and relationships. However, Native youth provided a unique perspective, and their critique covered issues such as fairness, violence, and opportunity as often as race or class. (KB)

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# A Different World

## Native American Children's Perceptions of Race and Class in the Media

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

I love watching TV.
I believe what I see.
I'm still looking
for me.

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CHILDREN NOW

A Series of Focus Groups of Native American Children

# How do I see me?

*Q: Do you see Native American kids in the media?*

*A: Once every blue moon.*

- Comanche boy, age 13

The young people we interviewed discussed the importance of seeing themselves to validate their experiences and provide role models. However, most said that they did not see youth with whom they could identify and who were true to life. Further, Native youth also stated that they do not see people of their own race. *"I don't see any Native Americans in the media,"* said a young Comanche boy from Oklahoma City. When asked to identify Native Americans actors, a few children answered, "Northern Exposure," or *"There was an* X-Files *[episode] a couple of years ago. . . ."* This scarcity corresponds to many kids feeling *"left out,"* and getting the message that minorities *"shouldn't be seen."*

## Do I see me?

When Native American youth do see other Native Americans on television, they experience a sense of pride. As one teen said, *"If I see a Native person on the television screen, I feel proud of them. I don't care what tribe they are, as long as they're Native and making a difference."* Another commented, *"I feel kind of good . . . because, like after so many shows about White people, Indians actually get a chance to be on TV. It makes me happy. It shows we're getting somewhere."*

***"They're poor." "All drunk." "They live on reservations." "Dance around fires and stuff." "They all drive pick-up trucks."***

- Youth talk about what people would learn about Native Americans from watching TV

The Native youth in our focus groups acknowledged the media's effects on perceptions of people of color. As one Cherokee/Osage girl said, *". . . [if] all I saw was all of the people with magenta noses shooting other people and badmouthing their parents and just being total buttheads, then I would think that all people with magenta noses were like that. And so [the media] has a powerful influence on people, and it can be good and it can be bad."* Accordingly, focus group participants talked about seeing racially stereotyped roles on TV, particularly for Whites and African Americans. *"Most TV shows have Black people as the bad guy . . . you rarely see Black people as the good guy." "White people are all rich and stuff." "Black people are always funny." "Black girls are either like a shrew or they're really easy." "Except for like say the* Cosby Show, *they're [African Americans] usually the b ad people doing bad things."*

# How do I see others?

**Native kids acknowledged the media's effects on perceptions of people of color.**

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On the rare occasions when Native youth do see their culture and race in the media, it is often **an unflattering picture.** As one Oklahoma City adolescent asserted, *"[Native Americans] aren't highly respected. They're not often shown as the main character or the heroine."* A teenage girl from Seattle told us, *"When you do see Native Americans on TV, it's like movies about reservations or something like that. And they're all drunk and beating up on each other. And they're poor."*

# What about the news?

Similar to their perceptions of the entertainment media, Native youth found Native representation in news both sparse and narrow. As one Comanche youth observed, *"Nobody really talks about our group,"* and when they do, it's about *"reservations," "casinos," "selling fireworks,"* and *"fighting over land."* Likewise, there were strong opinions about the race of news reporters. While most children admitted that there is an occasional face of color, all agreed that there needs to be more diversity. As a Hidatsa teenage boy stated, *"[It] makes you mad because you wish that other people could get in there, and not just White, because they're on everything."*

Notably, many of the Native youth stated that **they do not necessarily look to the news for role models or reinforcement of their identity.** Nonetheless, Native American young people do say that they feel proud when they see positive portrayals of their group. One Seattle boy told of a rare empowering experience with the news, *"See, there's this pow-wow in Albuquerque. It's called the Gathering of Nations. They announced it on TV and had video clips. I was really surprised about that. It was cool."*

**Native youth found Native representation in news both sparse and narrow.**

Interestingly, although they recognized that some groups are treated differently by the news media, most of the **kids did not point to race as a definite divider.** Responses to questions about racial differences ranged from *"I think it's kind of hard to tell, because we don't really look for it,"* to *"I think [minorities] are slightly [treated differently], but not like there's this big, huge gap in between them."* The **Native kids articulated more differences in treatment based on socioeconomic class,** *"The [news] media thinks of upper-class kids as perfect. What they don't really notice is the middle class and the lower class. They think they're something you step on. . . ."*

### Spotlight on Sports Media: Redskins and Tomahawks

Cleveland Indians. Kansas City Chiefs. Atlanta Braves. From little leagues to the NFL, American sports team names and mascots represent a unique media issue with particular resonance for the Native American community. The young people to whom we spoke had varying opinions on this phenomenon. Some thought it was "good," while others found the images offensive and inaccurate, and some were indifferent. A teenage girl from Seattle said, *"I personally don't have a problem with it."* Another Blackfeet/Cherokee boy added, *"Well, it's just the name of the team."* However, one Wichita girl observed, *"They use the name, but they can't put Native Americans on their team?"* and a 12-year-old Cheyenne boy asserted, *"They should have Native Americans, because it's 'Braves,' and they have a tomahawk on their logo. I think it's kind of bad because they don't have any Native Americans on the team. They're mostly White and Black."* And as one Seattle teenage boy stated plainly, *"You watch the Atlanta Braves, right? . . . They have that little tomahawk thing going down, the little thing they do, the little humming stuff . . . That's not who we are. It's just stupid."*



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# What I want to see...

***"Anybody would watch my [ideal] show because you wouldn't have to be a certain race to be on my show. Just be real."***

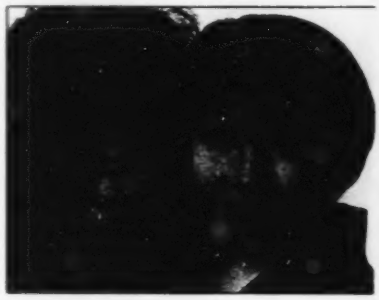
- Blackfeet/Gros Ventre/Tsartlip girl, age 14

Similar to the youth in the 1998 study, the young people in these focus groups had strong opinions about what they would like to see, ideally, on the screen. Native American youth are concerned about portrayals of their race in the media. *"I don't feel that Indians are getting the right respect that they need to be having,"* said a 12-year-old Cheyenne boy from Oklahoma City. When asked about characteristics of their ideal show, two young boys answered, *"My show would be about a kid in the Navajo nation,"* and *"It would be about someone who is smart and helps other people and doesn't pick on Indians . . ."* And one Seattle teenager offered the following advice, *"If they're going to put Indians [in the show], I'd tell them to actually go and study what they're about to film."*

**Native American youth are concerned about portrayals of their race in the media.**

Native American kids also echoed other young people's observations about the multicultural world in which they are living. All respondents said that they have friends of different races—Asian, Latino, African-American, and White. Accordingly, **they want shows that would appeal to "everybody," have a diverse racial cast, and reflect the realities of their lives**. As one Isleta boy from Albuquerque stated, *"Show them all people . . . Show them together. As friends."*

# Conclusion



Like the youth of other races, Native American young people share many common concerns about media portrayals of race and class. They observe that groups such as Asian Pacific Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos are conspicuously absent from the screen. They note that TV roles for Whites and African Americans remain constant and stereotyped. And they believe that the media wields significant power to influence opinions and relationships. However, the **Native youth also provide their own unique perspective.** Their critique of the news and entertainment media was multifaceted, covering a spectrum of topics far beyond the original inquiry. Issues such as violence, fairness, and opportunity came up as often as race or class.

Above all, most Native youth in these groups talked about looking beyond race, asking adults, media decision-makers, and all of us to look to their world, where *"Race doesn't really matter to us . . . If they're down-to-earth, everyday people who have the same type of problems as us and the same interests, like playing football or baseball or reading or playing video games or something like that, it's cool. Come chill with us. We should do things together, as friends."*



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In 1998, Children Now initiated a groundbreaking inquiry into children's perceptions of race and class in the media, focusing on the images presented by news and entertainment.

**Do you see yourself in the media? How do you see people of color portrayed on television? How does what you see make you feel about yourself and others?**

Through a series of focus groups and a national poll, we asked questions such as: Do you see yourself in the media? How do you see people of color portrayed on television? How does what you see make you feel about yourself and others? Young people told us that it is important for all kids to see people like themselves, that news portrays African Americans and Latinos more negatively than others, and that the media can send children powerful, positive messages about race.

Expanding this inquiry in 1999, Children Now conducted focus groups with Native American youth. With an Advisory Board of Native Americans involved in academia, advocacy, entertainment, and news, Children Now designed groups with a mix of demographics. From the reservations of New Mexico to the downtown schools of urban Seattle, we asked Native youth: What are your perceptions of how race and class are portrayed in the media?

Throughout these inquiries, children of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds provided varying responses to questions about representations, feelings, and ideals. Factors such as ethnic and racial identity, native and immigrant status, and rural and urban settings influence one's perceptions of race and class in America. Thus, while some kids felt most powerfully about their absence in the media, others were primarily concerned about stereotyped portrayals. Many of the Native youth spoke first about problems and issues apart from race, such as sex, violence, values, and the portrayal of young people in general. Nevertheless, common themes relating to the minority experience as a person of color appeared consistently in all the focus groups. Across all races, young people told us about the diverse world in which they are growing up and about their ideal of moving beyond race and toward greater inclusion. As one teenage Pawnee boy stated, *"All kinds of people can watch my [ideal] show because I'll have all types of races in there . . . you know, Whites, Mexicans, Blacks, Asians . . . boys, girls. It really doesn't matter because we're all, like, the same thing."*

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**Native American Advisory Board**

| | |
|---|---|
| Kara Briggs | Native American Journalists Association |
| Russell Coker | United National Indian Tribal Youth, Inc. (Unity) |
| Lori Edmo-Suppah | Native American Journalists Association |
| Professor John Sanchez | Penn State University |
| Sonny Skyhawk | Amerind Entertainment Group |
| Marjorie Tanin | Actress/Native American Entertainment Consultant |

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## Methodology

Lake Snell Perry & Associates conducted three focus groups of Native American youth in April and May 1999. The focus groups were designed with an Advisory Board, considering demographic variables such as tribal populations, reservation settings, urban settings, age, gender, and media access. All groups were led by a Native American moderator and boys and girls participated together.

All the focus groups were shown a video [the "sitcom reel"] with brief clips from all sitcoms shown on six networks—ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, the WB, and UPN—during one week in December 1997. They also participated in a "casting experience"—they were shown a diverse group of photos of aspiring models and actors, and asked to choose whom they would expect to see in the roles of lawyer, 'good' cop, 'bad' cop, criminal, drug addict, and prostitute, in a fictional new prime-time drama set in an urban area.

The focus groups took place in: Albuquerque, NM [4/30/99; ages 9-11]; Oklahoma City, OK [5/3/99; ages 11-13]; and Seattle, WA [5/5/99; ages 14-17]. The youth in this project represented the following tribes: Arapahoe, Blackfeet, Cherokee, Cheyenne, Choctaw, Comanche, Cochiti, Creek, Flathead, Gros Ventre, Hidatsa, Isleta, Laguna, Osage, Paiute, Passamaquoddy, Pawnee, Seminole, Tsartlip, and Wichita. As qualitative research, these focus groups represent an important starting point for the exploration of Native American youth perceptions of race and class in the media.

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